THE MOJO AND THE SAYSO

1989

Aishah Rahman

Writers are sometimes moved by articles that they read in newspapers or magazines, or by stories featured on television. Current events often become subject matter for their plays. Maxwell Anderson's interest in the Sacco and Vanzetti case resulted in *Winterset*, which most critics consider his greatest achievement. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was the result of his reaction to Senator Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist "witchhunt." James Baldwin's anger over the Emmitt Till case (a fourteen-year-old Black boy was brutally murdered in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman, and his murderer acquitted) was the motivation for *Blues for Mister Charlie*. The killing of a ten-year-old boy, Clifford Glover, compelled Aishah Rahman to write *The Mojo and the Sayso*. In a case of mistaken identity, Glover was fatally shot by a policeman as he walked down a Queens, New York, street with his father. The city paid Glover's mother for the wrongful death of her son, but she was swindled out of the money by her minister. After some investigation, Rahman realized that the Glovers were voiceless people. *The Mojo and the Sayso* would give them voice.

The Mojo and the Sayso has been called avant-garde, absurd, surrealistic, allegorical, farce, ritual, and satire; perhaps it is all of these things. The play unfolds like a nightmare with characters floating like clouds in and out of reality. Their lives have been uprooted by a senseless tragedy that they cannot comprehend. They are grieving for their son, Linus, who was killed by an off-duty police officer. To retain some sanity they must embrace something or someone for momentary escape. In other words, they must have a mojo—some form of magic—that will enable them to survive this tragedy. Awilda's escape is the church and her pastor; Acts, her husband, is totally immersed in the restoration of automobiles; their son, Walter, acknowledges his manhood and his Blackness by aligning himself with those young African Americans who were "beyond fear" and not afraid to act—even if acting means death. He also changes his name to Blood. They survive but are unable to free themselves of the

gloom that hangs over their home.

It is not until these characters participate in a ritual of exorcism, in which truths are revealed, that they are finally released from the darkness of despair and able to resume their normal lives. The scene unfolds like magic as Blood peels away the Pastor's facade layer by layer, exposing him for the vulture that he is. This transformation is both frightening and amusing, and is contrasted to Acts's automobile suddenly coming to life. Truth releases the family from darkness, and they are able to remove their garments of sorrow, replacing them with outfits symbolic of happier times. They sit in Acts's completed car and it drives them from darkness into light.

The nightmarish quality of *The Mojo and the Sayso* is enhanced by Rahman's use of the "jazz aesthetic." This " . . . aesthetic in drama expresses multiple ideas and experiences through language, movement, visual art and spirituality simultaneously." It "acknowledges the characters' various levels of reality."[1] We recognize this technique immediately in the opening conversation between Awilda and Acts. An idea is introduced just as a jazz musician might introduce a theme, then is abruptly dropped as the author seems to zoom into the mind of a character who speaks what is there, like a jazz improvisation might express what is on the musician's mind.

Rahman grew up in Harlem, where she attended public school. She began writing plays in the sixth grade. She has taught writing at Nassau Community College in New York and is currently teaching in Brown University's graduate creative writing program. She has received fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and from the Rockefeller Foundation. In addition, she is director of the Playwriting Workshop at the New Federal Theatre and cofounder of Blackberry Productions Company. She won the Doris Abramson Playwriting Award for *The Mojo and the Sayso in 1989*. Her other plays include *Lady Day: A Musical Tragedy*, *Tale of Madam Zora*, a libretto, *Has Anybody Seen Marie Laveau?*, and two one acts, *Transcendental Blues* and *The Lady And The Tramp*. Among her numerous awards Miss Rahman was cited in 1989 by the Rockefeller Foundation for American Playwrights for "proven talent, sustained dedication to work in the theatre and current productivity." Her forthcoming novel, *Illegitimate Life*, stretches across the borders of autobiography, fiction and memoir.

1. Sydne' Mahone, ed., *Moon Marked & Touched By Sun* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1994), p. 283.

The Mojo and the Sayso

Author's Note

The Mojo and the Sayso is a story of a family: vulnerable human beings who sustain pain and love, hatreds, fears, joys, sorrows and degradation, and finally triumph.

The production style should serve and illuminate the absurdity, fantasy and magic mayhem that are intrinsic in this script.

Characters

AWILDA
ACTS
BLOOD
PASTOR

Time

Now. Sunday.

Place

The living room of the Benjamins' home.

The Mojo and the Sayso

[for Clifford Glover and all the others . . .]

> *O deliver not the soul of thy turtle-dove unto the multitude of the wicked . . .*
>
> PSALM 74:19

Act 1

Morning. Lights up on the Benjamins' living room. Stage left is a mantlepiece with a collection of various colored candles on it. Center stage, on a slightly raised platform, is a half-built car. Hubcaps, tires, fenders, etc. are scattered around. The rest of the room is neat: it is only the platform area that is disordered. AWILDA, *dressed entirely in white, is frantically searching for something among the mechanical automotive parts. Her voice is heard over the whir of an acetylene torch which* ACTS, *inside the car frame, is using.*

AWILDA *(searching frantically for something very important)* Ball joints, tires, shock absorbers, spark plugs, carburetors.

ACTS The treasures and dreams that's buried in a junkyard!

AWILDA *stares at him unbelievingly for a second then continues her search.*

Damn near tore my paws off trying to get to this baby but I got it. Knowed it was only a few left in the world. Never thought I'd own one but I do now. A Lycomen engine. They used to put it in only the best of machines back in '47. Used to put it in a deluxe car they called the Auborn Cord. It had an electric shift, front-wheel drive same as you got today. Car was so advanced, so ahead of its time they took it off the market. Man this engine was so bad they used to put her in aeroplanes. Now I'm gonna put her right in, Jim!

AWILDA Wrenches. hammers.

ACTS Soon I'll be finished the dream car of my mind.

AWILDA *(reacts to his last words by looking at him and shaking her head: she resumes her search)* Batteries, mufflers, spark coils, piston rings, radiator caps, gaskets, fenders, exhaust pipes. White gloves? No white gloves.

ACTS A chrome-plated masterpiece. Brown and gold-flecked with a classy body . . . built with my own hands.

AWILDA I can't find them.

ACTS' *only response is to continue working.*

I searched and looked and searched and still can't find them. I searched and looked and rummaged all through this mess and I still can't. . . . *(going to the mantelpiece)* Let's see. Orange. A good color for concentration. *(she lights the candle and is immediately soothed)* There. I've lit the way to my white gloves. I'll have them in time to go to church.

ACTS' *only response is to bang with his hammer.*

Pastor Delroy wants all us saints dressed in white. Pure white, from crown to toe.

ACTS What a beautiful engine. They don't come any better.

AWILDA Don't forget this Sunday is special.

ACTS A priceless engine. Tossed away in the junkyard.

AWILDA It happened three years ago today.

ACTS Been looking for this engine for three years.

AWILDA And Pastor is having a special memorial service today for Linus.

ACTS And what do you know? Boom! This morning out of all the hundreds of other mornings. This is the morning I find him.

AWILDA There's gonna be organ music.

ACTS Must be some kind of special sign . . . finding this engine this morning.

AWILDA And flowers. Gladiolas and carnations. Lovely church flowers.

ACTS Now that I got the engine I want, I can finish him. Finish him today. Three years is a long time.

AWILDA Our choir will sing "Sweet Lil' Jesus Boy."

ACTS Soon he'll be purring like a kitten. Soon every nut and bolt will be in place.

AWILDA And the congregation will bow their heads for a moment of silence. And think of Linus.

ACTS Shut up! I see no need to draw attention to the unfortunate by-products of your womb!

AWILDA Our children. What became of our children?

ACTS *(getting up suddenly and leaving the room)* We'll say no more about it. No more!

AWILDA *(hurling these words at his exiting back)* You never talk about anything! Especially not about Linus.

ACTS *(returns, carrying a steering wheel)* That's another thing. He's dead. Let the dead rest. I never mention the boy's name in this house since the funeral but just like a woman you just talk and talk and always call his name.

AWILDA LINUS IS NOT DEAD. I remember him. Every part. I remember his scalp, his bones, his smooth flesh, the bright color of his blood, his white teeth, his boy smell. As long as I remember him, Linus is alive.

ACTS Linus is dead. *(taking her in his arms)* But I'm here.

AWILDA *(pushing him away)* If Linus could run as fast as you did, he could be here too.

ACTS *recoils from her as if she had slapped him.*

AWILDA *(horrified at what has slipped out of her mouth)* "He that is cruel troubleth his own flesh." Book of Proverbs, 29th Chapter, 11th verse. I feel terrible. I hope you can forgive me.

ACTS *(returning to his car)* You know a junkyard is a funny place. Most of the cars are thrown in the scrap heap because of lots of wear and tear. Not because they are worthless. Not worthless at all.

AWILDA Forgive me. It's just that we used to have two boys and now there's only one.

ACTS *only response is the voice of his hammer.*

And that one floats around with a bomb in his heart.

ACTS *continues to pound away.*

While I dream of Linus every night.

ACTS' *hammer continues to be his only response.*

I did it again last night.

ACTS' *hammering begins to accelerate.*

The only way I can remember it is to tell it.

ACTS *continues to hammer away.*

It's always the same dream. Linus is still ten years old but yet he is older than all of us. You and Linus and I are strolling down the avenue. Suddenly, Aretha's voice is all around us. We breathe it in with our bodies. It is like a feeding. When all of a sudden the music changes and the sound of Monk's piano jumps in front of us. The boy and I jump into the chords, leaving our bodies like old clothes.

ACTS *stops working on the car, looks at her as if this is the first time he has ever heard this.*

A-n-d you . . . you steal our bodies and run!

ACTS I do not! I DO NOT!

AWILDA You run and run and run and run! *(in the voice of Linus)* "Daddy, Daddy. Please . . . don't . . . run."

ACTS *(yelling and screaming)* You are such a liar! Look at you with your face twisted like a peach pit. You are such a liar! If lies were brains you'd be smart. If lies were mountaintops you'd be way up. If I wasn't such a calm and gentle man I'd strangle you till you admit that I don't run away. That I rush to your side.

That I put your bodies in mine. I keep telling you that.

AWILDA I know. Maybe I'll get it right tonight.

ACTS If you could only go to sleep thinking, "He could never run away and leave us in danger."

AWILDA But when I'm awake, I tell you that I believe you. Besides, what do you care what I think as long as God knows the truth. Isn't God enough for you?

ACTS HELL NO! I need people. I need you. There are nights when I see myself all the way to my bones. Check out every corner of myself and feel strong about me. But come the morning . . . I look at you and the doubt I see in you makes me guilty.

AWILDA "Heal me O Lord, my bones are vexed. My soul is sore vexed." Clean my thoughts and keep the Devil out of them. I want to believe you. I have to believe you but . . . but . . . just give me another chance. I'll dream it right. I promise I'll wake myself up if I dream it wrong.

ACTS All of us have a dream world. Get in, my lady.

Reluctantly, AWILDA *climbs in the frame of the car and sits. He continues in the manner of a king showing his queen the castle.*

This is where the radio's gonna be. Soon you'll be able to flick the dial to your favorite music. Not none of them Jesus songs, honey. I mean give me a break. You should learn how to drive. Be good for you. Give you something else to think about. You comfortable? I'm gonna cover the seats with something soft. Mink maybe. Just for you. Gonna put a bar in the back. You can keep your ginger ale in there. If you want. Here we go sweetcakes. Past Jamaica Avenue. Mmmmmmm. Smell the air. Someone's barbecuing. On. Here we go. We're cruising up past Kissena Boulevard, down Sunset, past Jamaica Avenue. Mmmmmmmmm. Smell the air. Someone's barbecuing. Look at those old wooden frame houses next to the tall apartment buildings. See the churches. See the ladies in they pinks and yellows and whites and blues. See the folks hanging out. See them turn they heads as we go riding by. Whew! Hot, isn't it? Let's get a couple of beers and drive out to the beach, take off our clothes and lay in the sun—

AWILDA *(standing up, breaking the spell)* I'm late for church.

ACTS Shh. Don't be scared. Don't be nervous. You with me now. Sit back down!

AWILDA *(sitting down)* I can't help it.

ACTS I know. I know. Just get it together. Listen, don't you hear what people are saying? They are saying, "There goes the wizard of the automobile world. Acts Benjamin and his wife. See that car he's driving? He only builds them for the leading citizens of the world." *(sees* AWILDA *getting up and tries to pull her back)* Hey, where are you going? We're almost there. I'll park the car and we can lay in the sun—

AWILDA I want to get out. I need my white gloves! I'm late for church!

ACTS It's folks like you that give religion a bad name.

AWILDA *(escaping from the car)* Now you listen to me. I'd rather do what God tells me than listen to you. *(resuming her search for gloves)* All you do is rummage through junkyards, bringing scrap that been thrown away right here, in our living room, working on the car, in our living room, every hour, day or night, winter or summer, snowstorm or heat wave, in our living room!

ACTS That's just why I want it in the house—so that the weather don't matter.

AWILDA All the time, whacking, banging, drilling on that . . . that . . .

ACTS Car . . . it's a car. I've told you two hundred times before. Don't call my car out of its name. Please . . . don't . . . badmouth . . . my . . . car . . . !

AWILDA All the time working on that car. Something I always wanted to ask you. Tell me. Just what do you get out of it? What do you see in it?

ACTS Anything I want to.

AWILDA Just tell me what.

ACTS I'm glad you finally asked. When I look at this car I see lots of things.

AWILDA What things?

ACTS I see understanding. No worries. I see tittie-squeezing and pussy-teasing.

AWILDA It's no wonder that I turned to Christ.

ACTS No wonder.

AWILDA Pastor says that you . . .

ACTS If I didn't have firsthand personal knowledge that Jesus done locked your thighs

and thrown the key away, that religion done stole your natural feelings. I'd be 'clined to think that you and that jackleg son of a bi—

AWILDA *(with religious fervor)* Jealous. That's what you are. Just plain jealous. Imagine being jealous of God. That's why you badmouth the messengers of God's word every chance you get. I used to have a hard heart like you till Pastor saved me. One day I was listening to him preach, my breath grew short, my throat closed up and I couldn't breathe. It was Pastor Delroy I was looking at but Jesus that I was seeing. "Lord," I said. "Lord, I am in your hands.

Her fervor has aroused ACTS. *He goes towards her and seriously tries to possess her.* AWILDA *struggles hard.*

ACTS I was once into that holiness bag and I know that trick. All them jackleg pastors and deacons and elders laughing at you and taking your money. All you women jumping up and down yelling, "Come sweet Jesus" need to stay home and say it to your husbands!

AWILDA You ain't nothing but the Devil!

ACTS *(suddenly disgusted, walks away from her, laughing harshly)* Forget about the Devil. Forget about the sign of the Cross. It is the sign of power *(holds up a dollar bill)* and the sign of the trick *(holds up a pair of soiled white gloves in the other hand)* that counts.

AWILDA You! You had them all the time.

ACTS *(returning to work on his car)* Maybe.

AWILDA *(snatching up the white gloves)* These white gloves are genuine brushed cotton. The other day I was downtown window-shopping, thinking about what I would wear in church today and suddenly I found myself in Bonwit's. I don't know how I got there. It was like my feet had grown a mind of they own. I wanted to turn around and run but something made me brazen it out. So I marched to the glove counter and stood there. Four detectives followed me. The salesgirl left the blue-haired, silver-foxed madame she was waiting on and rushed over to me. "Can I help you, Miss," she said. Imagine that. "Miss" to me though I am a married woman and had—at one time—two children. Then I told her, "I'm not a Miss. I'm a Mrs., and I'd like a pair of white gloves." "They start at fifty dollars, Miss," she snapped. And then I took my time and made her show me lace gloves, net gloves, nylon gloves, leather gloves, and I didn't like any of them until she showed me these. The most expensive ones and I said, "Oh, aren't they lovely. I'll take them." And so after all that aggravation I don't see why you would hide them from me unless you wanted to make me late for church and keep me here with you.

ACTS *(working on the car)* I'm getting kinda hungry, woman.

AWILDA Sure. What would you like. Spark plugs? Machine oil? Gasoline? *(*ACTS *ignores her)* I really think sometimes that you are turning into that car.

ACTS Honk honk!

AWILDA You could come with me if you wanted to. You could get dressed and come with me to church.

ACTS Don't get started on that again. Please.

AWILDA *(going toward the windows)* I'm opening up all the windows.

ACTS *(preoccupied)* Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

AWILDA Every night I lay out your striped blue suit and your Van Heusen shirt with the rolled collar and your diamond stickpin and your patent-leather wing tips and your ribbed silk socks and your monogrammed hand-embroidered linen pocket handkerchief hoping that you will come to church with me.

ACTS Me? I keep telling you. I don't go for that bull. Besides, your beloved Pastor is there. You don't need me.

AWILDA Need? I need you to talk to me. What happened that night. . . .Tell me that. That's what I need.

Silence. ACTS *works on the car.*

See that? All the trouble we went through was for God but all you think about is that car. You can build me a Rolls Royce and say it's mine but it ain't. It's God's car.

The sound of ACTS *working is his only response.*

Mr. Benjamin. I'm a God-fearing woman and I'm opening all these windows wide so that He can come in here and fill your heart.

ACTS *(looking up from his car)* Stay away from the windows.

AWILDA *(running around, opening up windows)* Get him God. Get him God. Come in. Come in. Stab his soul. Pierce his stubborn heart!

ACTS *(enraged, runs around slamming windows)* Shutupshutup-shutup. Goddammit! *(he smashes all the windows with a tool)*

AWILDA *(singing at the top of her voice)*

I knit my world
With strong church yarn
With stitches even and unbroken
For God is my true husband
Who keeps me from harm
He is my only one.

As ACTS *finishes breaking the windows, they gaze at each other silently. The maniacal peal of church bells rushes through the broken windows.* AWILDA *goes over to the mantelpiece, fighting tears, tries to light a candle but the wind from the broken windows keeps extinguishing it.*

AWILDA Blue is for peace.

ACTS *stands there gazing at the broken glass.*

I . . . we . . . need a blue candle.

ACTS *(looking at the broken windows and glass)* I'll clean it up later. I'm going to finish that car tonight. *(returns to car)*

AWILDA We've got to take care of one another. Keep healthy. There's no one else to look after us. *(begins a frantic search for something)* Where is it? I know I put it here.

ACTS Where is what? You got the white gloves, don't you?

AWILDA YOU KNOW what I'm looking for.

ACTS I don't have anything to do with it. Ever since it come in the mail yesterday. I give it to you.

AWILDA I couldn't look at it. But I remember. I put it right here.

ACTS Then that's where it should be.

AWILDA It's not.

ACTS It should be right where you put it.

AWILDA It isn't.

ACTS Look. If it can't walk, if it ain't got legs of it own, then it's gotta be where you put it.

AWILDA *(discovering a check)* Aha! Here it is. And I didn't put it there. Why do you keep doing that?

ACTS What? Doing what?

AWILDA The check. Putting it near my candles. This is the second time I've moved it away from here.

ACTS I don't. I didn't.

AWILDA Then how did it get here next to my candles?

ACTS Don't ask me.

AWILDA *(gingerly taking up check and looking at it)* UGH. I hate to touch it. It feels . . . funny. It's got an awful smell too. It must be the paper they use nowadays to print these things. "Payment for Wrongful Death." Big digits. Now we got lots of money. Lots of money for the life of our boy. How do they figger? How do they know? How do they add up what a ten-year-old boy's life is worth to his parents? Maybe they have a chart or something. Probably feed it into a computer. Bzzzz. "One scrawny brown working-class boy. Enter. No wealthy relatives. Size 4 shoe. A chance of becoming rich in his lifetime if he plays Lotto regularly." How many dollars? How many cents? Do they know about the time I found out I was pregnant with him? My absolute joy that God has sent me this child. True. I already had Walter but that was before you. But you loved us anyhow and soon Linus was growing inside of me because we were in love. Yes, there was never enough money and we were always struggling but that's just the way life is. We knew we were supposed to have this baby. You took me to your mother and father and sisters and all your sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles. Your whole tribe. You told them. "This is my woman and she's going to have our child." They all hugged and kissed me. Do they know about the way you would put your head on my stomach and listen? Did they figger in the way you held my hand with tears in your eyes when I was in labor? When he was born the grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors and friends brought presents, ate and drank and danced and sang. Do they know about those moments? Did they add them in here? And what about Linus himself? He would make me throw out all my mean, petty, selfish parts and give him the best person I could be. Remember when he was good? Remember when he was bad? The times he was like us yet someone brand-new? And . . . what . . . about . . . what . . . he . . . might . . . have . . . been? How do they figger? How do they know?

ACTS Evil. Blood money. Payoff. Hush money. . . . Do what you want with it and don't tell me.

AWILDA No one could fault you if you put it in the bank or started your own something with it. Every worldly person has got some fantasy.

ACTS *glares angrily at her but doesn't answer.*

I understand. If you would only talk about that night. Tell someone what really happened. Somebody. Anybody. Especially me. (ACTS *continues to remain silent)* One thing for sure. It ain't ordinary money and I won't buy a car or a house or store up riches like a vain, greedy sinner.

ACTS: *(barely audible)* I tried to protect him.

AWILDA *(does not hear* ACTS *and continues)* I thought Walter would have taken over after Linus. Look after everything. Look after us. . . . After "the accident" I put all my hopes on Walter. He was always making something. He was smart! He was kind! He was tender! You remember?

ACTS *holds her.*

Now he's got a grenade for a soul. Guns. Knives. Before the "accident" there wasn't a mean bone in his body. He loved everybody. Everybody loved him. He used to sing and dance and laugh all the time. You remember?

ACTS Go to church. I think a storm is coming.

AWILDA: *(holding her arms as if cradling a child, singing a lullaby)*

> Go to sleep my little son.
> Snow is falling on the sun.
> Trees run blood and sidewalks grow
> Guns besides a dead boy child!

(suddenly walking away from ACTS*)* Don't worry about a storm. The sun will light my path all the way to church. When I get there I will just pay attention to the songs and sermons, the music and words, voices, faces and feelings that keep me going. I guess I just believe in spiritual things. Spiritual things is all.

ACTS Better go. It's getting late.

AWILDA: *(whirling around dervishlike in her agony)* Then you stop time. I want you to stop it. Stop . . . time . . . now. Turn time back in its track. Make time go back to when Linus was alive. Make time go back to when Walter was tender. He was gentle. He wouldn't hurt anybody. Turn back time! Stop! Time! Stop!

During AWILDA's *monologue,* BLOOD *has stuck his face through one of the broken windows. While she is still speaking, he surreptitiously climbs through the window, registering fear and confusion.*

BLOOD *(at first in the voice of a terrified little child)* Mommy? Daddy? What's wrong? What happened? You aren't hurt are you? O GOD! MA? POPS? *(guns drawn, searching for imagined invaders)* ALL RIGHT. WHOEVER YOU ARE I KNOW YOU ARE HIDING IN THIS HOUSE. I KNOW YOU ARE HERE SOMEWHERE IN HERE. THROW OUT YOUR WEAPONS. GIVE YOURSELF UP. 'CAUSE I CAN BOMB YOU, SHOOT YOU OR CUT YOU. I DONE WARNED I AIN'T NO PUNK YOU DEALING WITH. THIS IS ME. BLOOD! *(he stalks around the room, searching for enemies)* Come on out. YA STUPID PUNK BASTIDS. I GOT YA COVERED FROM EVERY ANGLE. I WANT YOU ALIVE BUT I HAVE ENUF TO BLAST YA OUT! BETTER COME ON OUT NOW 'CAUSE YOU FOOLING WITH A MAN WHO IS NOT AFRAID OF DEATH!

ACTS FUCK YOU! This is our home. Put that gun down!

AWILDA This is our home!

BLOOD *(continuing his search)* I'LL BREAK YOUR NECKS. I'LL SMASH YOUR HEADS! I'LL BREAK YOUR BACKS!

AWILDA Walter! *(to* ACTS*)* Look at him! Imagine being afraid of my own son!

BLOOD It's okay Ma. Don't be afraid. COME ON OUT, GUYS. YOU DON'T HAVE A CHANCE!

ACTS Give . . . me . . . the . . . gun, Walter.

BLOOD GIVE IT UP! COME ON OUT! IT'S ALL OVER. I'LL BUST YOUR HEADS!

AWILDA A killer ain't a pretty sight.

BLOOD SHOW YOURSELVES NOW. HOW MANY OF THEM DID YOU SAY THERE ARE, POPS?

ACTS There's nobody in the house but us, punk, so . . . give . . . me . . . the gun!

BLOOD I'LL BLOW UP EVERY CORNER OF THIS HOUSE TILL THEY COME OUT WITH THEIR HANDS UP!

ACTS *has sneaked behind* BLOOD. *He knocks him down and gets the gun.*

ACTS *(pressing the gun right to* BLOOD's *head)* You want to play crazy? I'll show you how! This is the lowdownest trick you've pulled yet. This tops all!

BLOOD You just can't sneak up from behind, knock me on the floor and take my piece.

ACTS I can't?

BLOOD You'd better give it back to me before I get mad.

ACTS You will?

AWILDA *(To* BLOOD *in a soft, terrified voice; she keeps on repeating the words underneath the following dialogue)* Don't run don't shoot don't run don't shoot don't run don't shoot.

ACTS *(touches* AWILDA *to reassure her)* Will snookums get sooo maddy mad and doo-doo all over hims diapers? SHITFACE. YA FUCKING DUMB-ASS KID.

BLOOD I'M NOT A KID. I'M A MAN.

ACTS Didn't I tell you to keep your behind parts away from here till you could stop acting like a hysterical female. Like a lady on the ra—

BLOOD I'M NO LADY, MISTER. I'M A MAN!

ACTS *(keeping the gun aimed at his head)* Then stand up . . . M-A-N.

BLOOD Why you putting that pistol at me? I'm your son.

ACTS Get up!

BLOOD *(getting up)* Listen to me. Quit pointing it at me. It's loaded. You never listen.

ACTS You busted into my house with a loaded gun and you want me to listen. Go ahead. Talk!

BLOOD I . . . I . . . just came to say goodbye.

ACTS *(pressing the gun right up against* BLOOD's *temple)* Damn right you gonna say "goodbye."

Blood Easy. It's loaded. Let me explain.

ACTS Speak, liar.

BLOOD When I opened my eyes this morning I got that old feeling again. As I lay in my room, on my bed, I could see Lunus's blood on every street. The chalk outline of his body on every corner. I could see his brown leather jacket and his baseball cap tipped to the side. Once again this city was getting to me. I had to split. As I was coming down the street, walking to this house, I practiced saying goodbye. I knew you would be working on the car and when I told you I was leaving again you would grunt but not look at me. Mom would light a candle for me and look at me, accusing me, but not saying anything. As I come near the house I sense something isn't right. I creep up on the porch, afraid of my own eyes. Windows are busted. I hear Mom's voice. What's she saying? Sounds like crying. You are standing. Just standing in a river of broken glass. Staring. Staring out a busted window. What am I supposed to think? I stare in, thinking, "Don't worry Pops. Your son's here. I'll protect you."

ACTS Well, well, well. You protect me? What we have here is mighty Robin Hood. All you need is your pointed, upturned ballet slippers and your green tights!

BLOOD It's the truth.

ACTS You're a liar and this *(indicating gun)* is a lie.

BLOOD *just shakes his head from side to side.*

Never play with guns. Even if they aren't loaded. Didn't I always teach you that?

BLOOD You wanna kill me Pops? It's loaded.

ACTS Liar!

BLOOD Believe me. It is.

ACTS *pulls the trigger. It clicks empty. He looks at* BLOOD *with disgust and throws the empty gun at his feet.*

ACTS Get that thing away from around me!

BLOOD *(pleadingly)* So it wasn't loaded. Aren't you the one that always says, "Attitude is everything, Son"?

ACTS A bellowing bull never gets fat.

BLOOD *(walking and talking like a tough-guy gangster type)* You gotta be hard. Tough. Cold. Ice. Steel. Woof or be woofed at. Take no shit. Play with death. Learn to gamble. Learn to win. Learn to kill.

AWILDA Your brother wouldn't like to see you act this way. Especially today. Have some respect. I thought you were going to kill us.

BLOOD You afraid of me? O my God, Mom. I could never hurt you.

AWILDA *(begins to sweep the broken glass)* I mean there's all kinds of other ways to enter a house. You could have knocked on the door. Rang the bell . . . come through the front door. . . . A lot of other ways.

BLOOD I'm sorry.

AWILDA I remember the time you smashed the blue Mercury into the plate-glass window of Mr. Johnny's barbershop. Your father straightened out the motor bed, plugged the holes in the radiator, hammered out some of the dents and folds in the fender and taped a new light onto its front. It was one of the few times you helped him. Linus was always working on cars with him but you hardly did. You were different.

BLOOD *(taking broom from* AWILDA*)* You shouldn't do that. I'll do it.

AWILDA *(exiting)* Pastor's waiting for me. I'm late for church.

BLOOD *(goes over to* ACTS*)* Isn't there anything you can do?

ACTS *(working on the car)* Do? About what?

BLOOD Can't you get her away from that holy hustler? Can't you stop her from always going crosstown to his so-called "church"?

ACTS I tried, Walter.

BLOOD I keep telling you the name is "Blood."

Almost unconsciously, without being told, BLOOD *begins to hand* ACTS *tools that he needs. They pass the tools between them like a surgical team during the following monologue.*

ACTS I know why you doing all this. I know. I know why you so set to hurt me. It's your doubt about that night. Something you can never bring yourself to tell me. But the thought is always in you. I see it. I catch you looking at me wondering . . . and then turning away when I look at you. You think what people say about that night is true. I knew that soon as you went and changed your name. That wasn't right. You and I was real tight. Closer than father and son. We was Ace Boon Coons. 'Member the time I made a deluxe racer for you out of a rusty bicycle frame I found in the yard? We had a lot of nice years together before. . . . Why you wanna go and call yourself "Blood" when you got a perfectly good name like Walter Acts Benjamin the Second? There's a lot that goes into a name and you shouldn't just go and call yourself something else. A name belongs in a family. It was passed down to me and I take it and give it to you even though you ain't my flesh and blood directly. And you take it and throw it away. You shouldn't do that. I remember the first time I heard how good things were in New York. I decided to see for myself. I wasn't used to the cold and almost went back home but after a while I decided to stay. The first job I had in the city was driving a cab. Then I carted coal for a couple of years. After that I worked as a long-shoreman when I could. Then I went to work for a man named Quinn at the wrecking yard on Springfield Boulevard. And I worked many years as a garage handyman hoping one day to achieve the title of mechanic. I went near crazy from being alone until I met you and your ma. I first saw her in a little restaurant on South Road. The Silver Fly. I had to have her. We stayed up late talking and laughing. Soon we got married because after all that aloneness I been through she was having a kid for me. A baby with my eyes, my nose, my mouth and my name. Now I'm telling you straight, boy, what happened to your brother is done. I can't change it. Your mother can't change it and God won't. You ain't no different from any other person that something terrible has happened to. Don't let what happened to Linus madden or cheapen you. I bear a lot of pain but I bear it with expression. Just who in the hell do you think you are?

BLOOD *(walks away from him)* Who am I? I want to be a righteous gunman like George Jackson. Or his brother, Jonathan. I would have liked to walk in the courtroom where they acquitted the cop that shot my brother in the back with my guns drawn and announce, "All right, gentlemen, I'm taking over." Just like Jonathan did. Alone and armed. Righteous and tough. Beyond fear. He knew his fate and did not hesitate. A man evolved to the highest level. Now they mighta shot some bullets into Jonathan Jackson's brain that day but he ain't dead. I got to be him 'cause I sure ain't me. I should be the kind of man that pours down hot revenge on his enemies because I had a brother, once. A kid brother. Sometimes he used to pee in the bed. A scrawny, ash-brown kid, ninety-four pounds, about this high. He was always beating up on little girls 'cause he liked them. Used to be afraid of being weak and afraid. We used to arm-wrestle all the time and I'd let him win and then show him how I could beat him anytime I wanted to. He looked up to me and I liked that.

ACTS Tell you what. "Blood" or whatever you call yourself. We got some money now. Plenty of it with that "wrongful death" check from the city that come yesterday. Ask your mother for some. You'd be able to go anyplace.

BLOOD I don't want any of that money. I can get all kinds of bread.

ACTS Yeah?

BLOOD Yeah.

ACTS You called me on the phone and asked me for money, I remember.

BLOOD That was a long time ago.

ACTS When you gonna pay me back?

BLOOD Soon.

ACTS You need money. Ask your mother.

BLOOD You think I want to stand here and argue with you about that filthy blood money? I know the price we've all paid for it.

ACTS You sure you don't want to come sneaking up on us and knife us in the back?

BLOOD That's not funny, Pops. I hate that money much as you. It's no treasure. It's no pot of gold after the rainbow.

AWILDA *starts to enter and stops. Audience sees her standing and listening.* BLOOD *and* ACTS *are unaware of her presence.*

ACTS Money, money, money. It's the story of our lives. "Learn how to make you a dollar, boy. Earn some spending change and keep you some folding money and don't let anybody take your money from you," I used to preach to Linus. So he would get up every Saturday and go to the yard with me before dawn. That's when they shot him. Right before daybreak. And though everybody knew the truth, they said Police Officer Rhea was only doing his duty.

BLOOD In school he would tear up his work in a rage if he got a bad mark. At home, he was our mother's favorite child and I knew it. When he discovered he had a joint he used to go around touching it, looking at it, airing it out, seeing how far he could pee with it. What a little brat!

AWILDA *(entering the room, concentrating on her white-gloved hands)* Pastor said Linus would have turned out to be somebody. Somebody big. You know what Pastor says. Pastor says we should give Linus a special memorial. Something unusual and unselfish. That's what Pastor says.

Lights start to dim as AWILDA *continues to turn her hands inside out, stretching her arms toward the sky as if she were dancing.*

Ever notice how when you wash white gloves just one time all the life seems to go out of them? Suddenly they are old. Like faded bits of sunlight. Can you tell these are not fresh, pure, unwashed white gloves that I'm wearing to church this morning?

ACT 2

Scene 1

Evening. New windowpanes. Everything has been cleaned. BLOOD *is repairing the last window.* ACTS *is underneath his car, working.*

BLOOD *(talk-singing to himself as he hammers a nail in place and plays an imagined guitar):*

And I said to myself
'Cause I'm always talking to me,
"Self," said I,
"We all must die
And darkness will soon surround us."

"Ohhhhhhhh NO!" self hollered.
"I don't want to be dead.
Me, I ain't never gonna die
Gonna buy a car,
Gonna drive it far,
Gonna drive away from me, myself and I."

(steps back and surveys his work) Shall I paint them, stain them or what?

ACTS *(preoccupied)* Mmmmm. Yeah. Okay . . .

BLOOD Which one?

ACTS Whatever. Valves are slightly worn but that's light stuff.

BLOOD *(angrily)* How would you like the windows done up in red? Red paint?

ACTS Wrist pins and connecting rod bearings are in good condition.

BLOOD It must be hard on Mom.

ACTS She'll be glad you fixed them. Low oil consumption. This baby is practically brand-new.

BLOOD I'm not talking 'bout the windows. I mean her. My mother and your wife.

ACTS What about her? The flywheel is okay too. Hotdammit! It's gonna be something else when I finish.

BLOOD Nothing else matters to you. That's gotta be hard on her.

ACTS S'no difference between a car and a woman. Cool 'em. Ignite 'em. Give 'em plenty of lubrication. Keep their engine in good condition.

BLOOD *(as he speaks he writes red graffiti on the new windowpanes)* I had a woman once. She worked at the express counter in the supermarket. I used to make seven, eight shopping trips a day just to walk through her line. Every time she saw me she smiled and I was sure she really loved me. Whenever she asked me if I wanted a single or double bag I knew she was really pledging her love. And all those times I replied, "Single bag, thank you" I was really asking her to let me drink her bathwater.

Although I never knew her name, we were very happy. All over the city I drew red hearts for her. No clean space went unmarked. I even added some of my blood to the red paint. When I pricked all my fingers and toes I started on my knuckles and ankles. It hurt like hell!

One time I stayed up all night making hearts for her. Next morning I ran to our supermarket and got on her line. Some man was with her making her laugh. She didn't even know that I was there. I just stood there looking at her. I screamed at her silently, "You love him and not me. You want his low voice, his strong chest and his big thighs. Why can't you want me?" I was very angry.

ACTS *(surveying the windowpanes without ever stopping his work)* I know what you trying to do but it won't work. You striving to prevent me from getting my work done. You hate this car. You trying to keep it from being born. Now you can act a fool if you want but just don't get in my way.

BLOOD *(resignedly looking over the car)* It's state-of-the-art all right.

ACTS Damn straight.

BLOOD You sure ain't no "pliers-and-screwdriver" mechanic.

ACTS Never was. Never will be.

BLOOD *takes out a gleaming knife with a feather stuck in its handle and plays with it.*

What . . . is . . . that?

BLOOD It's a knife, man.

ACTS For what?

BLOOD *slowly takes out an orange and begins slowly to peel it as he looks at the car.*

BLOOD For peeling things. I like to peel things. Just like to see if with one slow continuous steady movement I can take the skin off anything in one, long, thin, graceful, piece.

ACTS Hope you can handle a knife better than you can a gun.

BLOOD I can do a lot of things. *(holding up the entire orange peel in one piece)*

ACTS What about important things? You remember the first time I put you underneath a car?

BLOOD No. I don't remember.

ACTS You need to kneel down beside me again and take another look. Give you a different perspective when you laying on your back flat out, looking up inside the belly of a car.

BLOOD No thanks. All you do is wake up thinking about your car and sleep dreaming about it. No thank you. What about me? You never really talk to me. And when you talk you never really say anything.

ACTS Okay, you been after me all this time so I'm gonna talk. Gonna tell you something. So listen real good.

As ACTS *speaks* BLOOD *keeps peeling, letting the peelings and fruit pile up on the floor. Every once in a while he seems to nick himself accidentally.*

In this world, in order to survive, you gotta have a little gris-gris to depend on. It could be anything. A prayer, a saying, a rabbit foot, a horseshoe, a song. A way of looking at life, a way of doing things, a way of understanding the world you find yourself in. Something that will never fail to pull you through the hard times. Now I see you got no formula for survival, no magic, no juju, so let me give you a very important piece of mojo right now. Always remember that the secret of a car is its engine. The engine is the car's heart. Treat it right and you can trust it. The trick is you gotta take your time and learn it. Study it inside out. Most folks abuse the engine by racing it when it's cold. How would you like to be waked up in the morning by someone shouting and screaming at you while you're still yawning and under the covers? You couldn't respond even if you wanted to. It takes time to fully warm up. And you gotta give it good fuel.

Then you gotta inspire it. Set it on fire. Ignite the bad boy. Then he's gotta be stroked and lubricated real good. Now don't forget there's plenty of fire and heat inside so you gotta cool him off, too. Learn the engine, boy. Understand the heart. It's the secret of life.

BLOOD Is that all you can talk about? Cars? Is that all?

ACTS Fool! Is that all you think I'm talking about? *(he grimaces in sudden pain)*

BLOOD What is it . . . what's wrong?

ACTS *(a gesture of weariness)* Nothing. I ache all over.

BLOOD What do you expect, hunched over that car all day and night? A good massage will fix you up. *(he begins to massage* ACTS' *shoulders, gently at first and then with increasing violence)*

ACTS Ahhhhhh. That feels good. Ouch. Not so rough.

A look passes between BLOOD *and* ACTS *which establishes the element of distrust between them.*

BLOOD *(continuing the massage)* Is this where the pain is? *(gives him a powerful whack on his shoulders)*

ACTS *(trying unsuccessfully to move away from him)* No! Get away from me.

BLOOD *(trying to continue massage)* Be still.

ACTS Kinda rough there, aren't you, "Blood"?

BLOOD *(poking* ACTS*)* Is the pain here? Or there?

ACTS Let me go! Ouch! Ow!

Another look passes between them.

BLOOD Oh, I'm sorry, man.

ACTS Walter, don't you know when you're hurting someone?

BLOOD I'm not sure what you want, Dad.

ACTS I want you to stop, Son.

BLOOD *(gives* ACTS *a final, painful shoulder jab)* There! Doesn't that feel better?

ACTS Holy shit. What the hell is going on here?

BLOOD Every movement, every touch means something. *(suddenly releasing* ACTS *and running toward the car)*

ACTS Get back. Don't touch it. Keep away.

BLOOD It's a beautiful car. Just beautiful. *(he begins to disarrange various parts of the car)*

ACTS That's not it! That's not it at all! Get away from the damn thing. Stand back. *(pushing* BLOOD *away from the car)* Just look at it and don't touch a damn thing.

BLOOD *stands for several beats, looking at the car. He holds his hands together as if in prayer. Then he suddenly begins to pick up the peelings and fruit from the floor and carries them to* AWILDA's *candles on the mantelpiece, where he spreads them while mumbling in a strange language.* ACTS *watches him, fascinated.*

BLOOD It's a ritual.

ACTS Ritual?

BLOOD Yes. For your forgiveness.

ACTS Mine?

BLOOD Yes.

ACTS Why?

BLOOD *(searching)* Because . . . because . . . you broke the windows! WHY DID YOU BREAK THEM?

ACTS That was because your mother started on me about her "Pastor." I went off. The ground parted. Quick flashes of lightning stabbed at my head. My blood boiled.

BLOOD I know the feeling.

ACTS Be careful. It's in our blood.

BLOOD What's it called?

ACTS It ain't a disease. It's a condition. A condition I tell you. All of us are thinking about one thing. A boy brought up in the city and killed by wild dogs. *(returning to his car)* But when I am working on this car I don't feel a thing. I feel clean. I feel strong. I feel free.

BLOOD I feel like shit!

ACTS Get away from your mother's candles.

BLOOD My mother! What do you care about her?

ACTS I do. A lot. But she's with her "Pastor" now.

BLOOD *(exploding, violently blowing out candles)* Shit on her Pastor! *(blows out more candles)* I hate Sunday con men! *(blows out the last candles)* And their wicked trickerations!

ACTS Don't do that! What gives you the right?

BLOOD Pops, let's leave here. Let's not stay here. We should just take that money and run. You and me and Mom should get outta this place. Make a new start.

ACTS Oh yeah? Where, for instance?

BLOOD Let's go to Mexico.

ACTS Mexico? What they got down there for me besides refried beans and the worthless peso?

BLOOD You could get land cheap down there. In less than ten years it's worth three times what you paid. You could build cars down there. I know a special spot down there. A city in the mountains.

ACTS That's your world. My world is right here. A world where all the cars that my mind can conjure up is brought to life.

BLOOD Forget it man.

ACTS So . . . you liked it down in Mexico?

BLOOD I didn't get in trouble with the police if that's what you mean.

ACTS Then why did you come back this time?

BLOOD We're family. We're chained together.

ACTS Then why are you leaving?

BLOOD I can't stay here. Do you know what it means to be the surviving brother? You never talk about the morning that Linus was killed. You were with him when he got killed but you don't tell what really happened.

ACTS You know Walter, you'll be okay once you get yourself together. Take care of your own self. You need to get a mojo and don't worry about me none. The right mojo will give you the sayso. Put you in the driver's seat. The right mojo will take you over those moments of terror, doubt or even surprise. Nothing surprises me no more. I'm ready to take it all on.

At this moment we hear the singing, talking and laughing voices of AWILDA *and* PASTOR DELROY *offstage. Blackout.*

Scene 2

The stage slowly lights up as AWILDA *and* PASTOR DELROY *enter the room, still singing.* AWILDA, *radiant and nervous as a young girl on a date, is carrying a bouquet of multicolored gladioli. The* PASTOR *wears a clerical collar, robe and white gloves.*

AWILDA Mr. Benjamin! Walter! You two, we have special company. Oh Pastor, what a voice you have. Deep and rich and full like a . . . a . . . man! You could have been a singer with millions of fans instead of a man of God. In church I can hear your voice over all the others. *(to* WALTER *and* ACTS*)* What a lovely service. You two should have been there. Going to church is like going to a garden where beautiful music grows. And the beautiful carnations and gladiolas on the altar. I brought some home because church flowers are special.

PASTOR Brothers Benjamin, senior and junior. Peace and love. Our lovely sister Awilda asked me to stop by.

ACTS Oh yeah?

PASTOR I see you are still working on your car? Imagine that. Looks like you'll even be finished soon. *(makes a gesture to touch the car)*

ACTS *(ferociously)* Don't touch him.

PASTOR *(backing away, frightened)* Brother Acts. I've always felt that you fear me. There is no need to. Don't you know that "He that feareth is not made perfect in love"?

ACTS Don't you know that he that fucketh around with my car will be made perfect in death?

PASTOR Brother Benjamin, you can't mean that I'm not welcome here?

ACTS You never had any trouble feeling comfortable before. The wife seems to fry chicken just the way you like it.

PASTOR You don't expect me to refuse the gracious invitations of the lovely saints of my congregation, do you?

ACTS I have a line in my mind that divides the killer beast from the gentle man. Be careful. You are stepping awfully near the edge.

AWILDA There's something wrong in here. I felt it as soon as I walked in. New windows? All written over in red paint, AND WHAT IS THIS SHIT AROUND MY CANDLES? Who blew them out? What the Devil is going on around here now?

BLOOD *(going toward her, trying to calm her)* Easy Ma, let me explain.

AWILDA *(shrinking back from him)* That's all right. I should have known. Every time you're around I never know what is going to happen.

BLOOD I'll . . . I'll scrub the paint off . . . before I split.

AWILDA No! Don't leave. Today is Linus's anniversary.

BLOOD LINUS IS DEAD!

AWILDA *is lighting all the candles as if to revive him.*

PASTOR Sister, do not despair. Linus is near us, though unseen. His spirit depends on us to remember him in special ways.

ACTS Back off, Delroy! You are stepping on my line.

PASTOR I feel Linus nearer and nearer. Sometimes I can see him. I can see him standing large as life in front of me. He never looks at me. He's just there.

BLOOD *(to* AWILDA*)* Can't you see it's just an act?

PASTOR I tell you sister, there is no death. "The stars go down to rise upon some fairer shore. And bright in heaven's jeweled crown they shine, forevermore!"

ACTS *(grabbing him)* You have just crossed the equator. Get the hell out!

AWILDA Pastor should be here.

BLOOD I'm sorry about the windows. I was only trying to communicate with my father.

AWILDA I wanted Pastor here when I told you about the money.

PASTOR Amen.

ACTS What . . . about . . . the . . . money?

AWILDA Linus is getting a memorial.

PASTOR Praise Him!

BLOOD It's a damn shame.

AWILDA What are you saying?

BLOOD It's a damn shame that I'm alive and Linus isn't.

PASTOR I tell you all that Linus is alive and we must remember him.

ACTS We need to be alone right now, Delroy.

AWILDA No.

PASTOR *(seductively)* Awilda.

ACTS Awilda,. Awilda, now you listen. I been thinking. This car is gonna be finished soon. Then we gonna leave. All of us. We gonna slip out easy like a soft wind. When folks catch on that ain't nobody in this house anymore you know what they gonna do? They gonna break in and I leave everything to all of them. My rubber galoshes, my old brown leather longshoremen's jacket with the lamb's-wool lining, my checkerboard, my dream-books, my fishing poles—I'll get new ones—my Gene Ammons' seventy-eights and my tools. Let them take my acetylene torch, cutters, dollies and hammers, my balancers and hydraulic pressers, my reamers, hones and wrenchers, my gauges and gappers, and place them in the middle of Springfield Boulevard and burn them! Any second, this car will be finished and we'll all get in. I want you to put on the blue dress you was wearing at the Silver Fly that day I first seen you. And Walter's gonna wear his Mexican shirt. The car radio's gonna be on. The dial will be set. Chuck Berry, Ivory Joe Hunter and Nat King Cole will be bluesing around. Little Esther is wanting a "Sunday Kind of Love." Jimmy Garrison is on bass. Max is on drums. Monk is on piano. The Orioles. The Moonglows. Little Willie John and Aretha. All the sounds of all the ages coming together in my car.

AWILDA I remember how I used to love driving with you, listening to music, feeling the wind against my cheeks.

PASTOR Seek ye not the vain pleasures of this world, sister. Remember Linus.

AWILDA Ever since the money came I been thinking. We need something money can't buy. That's why I . . . I . . .

PASTOR You want me to hold your hand while you tell them?

AWILDA No.

PASTOR You want me to tell them for you?

AWILDA No.

PASTOR All right, then tell them!

AWILDA I'm giving the money to Pastor's church in Linus's name.

PASTOR Amen.

ACTS *begins a slow, dangerous laugh.*

There is no greater memorial.

ACTS *lunges at* PASTOR *and narrowly misses him.*

(remaining calm as he sidesteps ACTS *and speaks in a soft, sanctimonious voice, full of righteous piety)* "He delivereth me from my enemies. Yea, from those that rise up against me. Verily I say unto you, 'He delivereth me from the violent man.'" My poor, sinful brethren. You are consumed with hypocrisy and greed. "And the greedy man shall retch up his desire for it is an unclean thing." And the hypocrites shall burn! burn! in the lower depths. Rise! Cleanse yourselves and admit that you want that money. You don't want God to have it. You lust after each dollar and have silent plans how to spend every cent.

Remember, beloved, "Lying lips are an abomination and the liars shall all be stripped of their foul pretense." Why do you denounce

my church? Why do you rail against my religion? Why do you attack all that is upright and righteous in this ungodly world full of evil fornicators? Why do you attack me?

My only concern is Linus and his immortality. Do not let the world forget him. He who was crushed by the forces of wickedness! He who was the fairest among boys. He who was snatched from us before the soft down of manhood kissed his cheeks. His loins yet girded with innocence. A bright-eyed, graceful manchild. O! Countless are the splendors of this world but none more splendiferous than was that fine, tender young boy!

BLOOD *(taking out his knife)* You weren't counting on murder, were you?

PASTOR Perhaps you're right. I'll just come back some other time.

PASTOR *tries to leave;* BLOOD *stops him with the knife.*

AWILDA Walter, stop it. I've been so afraid that you would hurt someone.

ACTS *(moving toward* AWILDA*)* Walter, put the knife away. I keep telling you, it's not a mojo.

BLOOD I have got to find a way to make you all listen to me. *(everyone is frozen)* I've got to find a way to make you all LISTEN TO ME!

Down in Mexico, in spots where I've been, some natives have a ritual for this kind of man. They believe in releasing the lies from his flesh. They just skin the poor devil alive. I've seen it done and it's just like skinning a fruit. Now listen up, your righteousness. I'm a-going to take my knife and slowly cut you from your larynx to your rectum. Then I'm going to flop you on your belly and peel away your lying skin in one piece just like a new suit of clothes. Just like an orange peel. *(everyone is terrified as he keeps talking. He menaces Pastor with the knife)* First, I'll work the skin over your skull and cut it with care so that it all comes off in one piece. Don't worry. I'll be careful when I cut around your eyes.

PASTOR *emits a terrified howl.*

I'll make an incision in your throat to a point midway in the calf of your leg.

ACTS Walter.

BLOOD I'll grab your scrotum. Or is it scrotii?

PASTOR Oh Jesus!

BLOOD And make an incision in each.

PASTOR *(doubling over in imagined pain, protecting his groin)* Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

BLOOD *(to* PASTOR*)* STRIP!

PASTOR *blinks frantically, not believing his ears.*

AWILDA Walter!

BLOOD Look at him. I want you to look. You won't look at me and you can't see through him. *(to* PASTOR*)* I . . . said . . . off . . . with . . . the . . . clothes, holiness.

PASTOR *slowly begins to remove his clerical collar, his white gloves and his robe. Around his neck is gleaming gold jewelry; he is dressed in a silk suit and other items of luxury. He has revealed himself as a "dandy man." When he takes off his white gloves he reveals the talons of a bird of prey with gleaming rings around them.* ACTS, BLOOD *and* AWILDA *are amazed at first and then* ACTS *and* BLOOD *double over, convulsed with laughter.*

AWILDA Pastor? Pastor?

BLOOD *(ridiculing him in a singsong chant)* "He took Ms. Johnson's money, poor old Miss Baker's Social Security, and made her throw in those diamonds he's wearing for an extra blessing."

ACTS Wife? Is this who you trust over me?

AWILDA *(in a daze)* No.

BLOOD Off with your clothes, reverent reverend.

PASTOR *continues to undress. He is wearing a jeweled G-string. S&M boots and other suggestive clothing.*

BLOOD "Jeanie Taylor, Diane Williams and little Dickie Hill were disgraced by his sexual conduct. But his congregation forgave him."

AWILDA *(gets nearer to* PASTOR *and inspects every inch of him)* Take it all off. Down to the bone. I want to see it all.

PASTOR *hesitates;* BLOOD *menaces him.*

BLOOD All off. You heard the lady, holy father.

As PASTOR *strips, he begins to take on the movements and rhythms of a vulture. He reveals a feathered body, a hook nose and webbed, claw feet. He makes vulture noises as he begins to execute*

broad, swooping circles around AWILDA, *as if stalking his prey.*

AWILDA *(beating back the* PASTOR/*vulture as if exorcising something within her)* Scavenger! Bird of Prey! Vulture!

They both turn around in circles, he stalking her, she beating him off.

He has sharp eyes and a keen sense of smell. He can see dead animals from a great distance.

She tosses him her church flowers and white gloves, which he gobbles up, eating and retching at the same time.

He eats carrion, dead animals, dead things. He often vomits when feeding.

PASTOR/*vulture begins to stalk her once more.*

Drive back the unclean scavenger with living flesh. He only thrives on decay. Drive him out with living thoughts and a living heart. He only feeds on the dead. Only the living live in here. Out! Out! Out!

PASTOR/*vulture is driven out through the window. Exhausted,* AWILDA *collapses in the arms of* ACTS *and* BLOOD.

ACTS Awilda.

AWILDA Tell me what happened that night. Please.

BLOOD Go ahead, Pops. Tell her.

ACTS You are right, Son, I ran. I ran away.

BLOOD What!?

ACTS We both ran. The boy and I both ran.

ACTS *holds the check, inspecting the look, feel of it as he talks to it. Lights dim, candle flames grow higher as* ACTS *continues.* AWILDA *and* BLOOD *listen intently, for this is the first time they have ever heard the story.*

ACTS It's funny how it always comes back to money. It's funny how money is supposed to explain everything and make anything all right. It was a Saturday, right before dawn, and as you know, the boy and I were on our way to the yard. Fooling around with cars is in my bones so I figure since Linus takes after me in so many ways he could learn it real good and earn a little change too. So when he turned ten, he started coming with me on Saturday mornings 'cause the rest of the week he's in school like he's supposed to be. He was a nice boy. Very respectful. Very intelligent. He would have been a good mechanic some day.

I remember it was early spring but the dew made it cold. The sky was that light purplish gray you get right before dawn. We was both walking, not saying too much. I guess it was just too early to be doing a lot of talking. We walked down New York Boulevard through the vacant lot littered with broken glass, past the trees that rise right out of the trash and grow fifty feet tall. Suddenly two guys with plain clothes pull up in a plain car and yell at us, "Stop." Their car screams to a halt. I didn't even recognize them as humans so how should I know they was cops, creeping toward us, hissing, "Stop, you sons of bitches," laughing and drinking as they cursed us. Said in the papers they was looking for two grown burglars. My little son and I wasn't no burglars.

My wallet was bulging on my hip. I had just gotten paid. I had it all figured out. These drunken jokers are ordinary crooks trying to rob me. I figure the way they are drinking I can outrun both of them and you remember how Linus could outrun a chicken. "Run," I command, and we take off. Linus shoots out in front of me and I was right behind.

They didn't even chase us. A flat loud sound ripped the air and Linus fell and instantly became a red pool, his eyes a bright, white blank. They shot Linus in the back. They killed him! They shot my boy!

Always, always, in my head, "Should I have stood my ground and fought them? Was I trying to protect my money more than Linus?" Ain't no way I could run away and leave Linus alone, is there? LINUS RAN AHEAD OF ME AND LEFT ME! I know that's the way it happened. But sometimes a man can get confused and the way something awful happens isn't always the way you remember it. I play it back all the time in my head and my only thought that night was to protect Linus. At least that's the way I remember it.

He slowly tears the check to shreds. Suddenly the car headlights are blinking, the motor is running, the horn is honking and the radio is playing.

AWILDA *(coyly)* Mr. Benjamin, my blue dress is ready.

ACTS Blue dress?

AWILDA You know, the one I was wearing that day we first met.

She removes her church clothes and reveals her blue dress)

BLOOD *(dancing around and singing in a Spanish accent while revealing his Mexican shirt)* No more pain, no more blood, no more pain, no more blood.

ACTS *(taking off his mechanic's clothes, reveals his striped blue suit, rolled-collar shirt, diamond stickpin, leather wing tips, etc.)* I did it just like I said I would. It's crashproof, with an automatic fire extinguisher, electric shift and front-wheel drive, and rear seats that rise through the sunroof. A pretty machine nine hundred times as powerful as human man. It ain't even a machine. It's a force of nature, that's what it is. The Mojo 9. Built by a man who walked through iron times and is still kicking. See, look. My eyes are clear. My skin is tight and my body well-tuned for any situation. You all should trust me. Come with me. Mojo can take us anyplace. Mojo will get you through. I'll show you how to build an engine, boy, and you won't have to worry your head about nothing. Come on. What are you two standing there for? Get in. What are you waiting for?

ACTS, AWILDA *and* BLOOD *all climb in the car and the* MOJO *is driven straight through the door.*

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BLACK THEATRE USA

PLAYS BY AFRICAN AMERICANS

1847 to Today

Revised and Expanded Edition

Edited by

JAMES V. HATCH
TED SHINE

DRAFT

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